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The dominating issue

London

1909

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THE DOMINATING ISSUE.

A SPEECH

DELIVERED BY

THE RIGHT HON.

H. H. ASQUITH, M.P.

(PRIME MINISTER).

AT

THE NATIONAL LIBERAL CLUB,

On DECEMBER 11th, 1908.

1909.

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THE DOMINATING ISSUE.

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MR. ASQUITH, in response to the toast of his health, proposed by Mr. John E. Ellis, M.P., said:—Mr. Ellis, colleagues, and friends,—I offer my most profound and heartfelt thanks to the promoters of this dinner for the kindly thought which inspired it and to every one present seated at these tables—and they are all familiar faces—for this striking and moving demonstration of your confidence. Sir, it is exactly, or almost exactly, three years ago to-day since a Liberal Administration was installed in power. I am prepared to maintain the proposition that those three years have been as fruitful in administrative and legislative benefits to the people of this country as any corresponding term in our political annals. It is true, for reasons to which I shall have reason in a few moments to advert, that we have left undone some things, or, rather, we have been prevented from doing some things of consequence which we hoped and attempted to accomplish. But we are met here to-night not in a penitential mood, not to acknowledge our unprofitableness, not to take upon ourselves the language either of remorse or of apology. As our thoughts to-night are naturally more occupied with the present and the future than with the past, I shall not endeavour to make anything like an exhaustive survey of our work. But, Mr. Ellis, to say of a Government and of a Parliament—I will only take one or two illustrations—which abroad has maintained at its highest level the authority and the influence of Great Britain as a friend of peace and as the vindicator of the public law of Europe, which in South Africa has put an end to the disastrous experiment of Chinese labour and brought Britain and Boer together to co-operate side by side in the working out of free and responsible self-government, which here at home has given to our own people statutory access to the land, and which has established a system of national provision for old age—to say of such a Government and Parliament that they have been either unmindful of their pledges or impotent to give effect to them is a patent travesty of the truth.

'The Mandate for the Licensing Bill.

None the less, the occasion of our dining here together to-night has, from the political, quite apart from the personal point of view, a curious significance. Festal demonstrations such as this are usually held in England to signalise or to commemorate a successful achievement. We are met here to celebrate a failure. Yes, but a failure of such pregnant meaning that its history is, I think, worth narrating. I am not going into the merits of the Licensing Bill. All of you here have heard me quite as often as you wish on that particular topic. But I should like to say, if I may, two or three things about it which are strictly germane to the purpose of my speech to-night. In the first place, its main principles—particularly the principle of a time-limit, in other words of the prescription by law of a measurable term of years in which the monopoly value which the State creates is to pass out of private hands and inure to the benefit of the community—those principles were clearly in issue before the electors of 1906. If there is any one—I am sure there is no one here—but if there is anyone outside who doubts the truth of what I say, I recommend him to consult the electioneering literature which was issued at that time warning the electors of the effect which would result if the majority of their votes were given to the Liberal party, and which was disseminated broadcast by every organisation of the trade.

The Commons and the Licensing Bill.

Next let me point out that six full weeks of Parliamentary time were given in the House of Commons to the consideration of this Bill, every capital principle in which, I do not hesitate to say, was exhaustively and repeatedly discussed. And if there were any of its minor provisions which were left undebated, that was not due to the lack of available time but to the different use which was made of time which might have been employed for the purpose. And, lastly, as the chairman has already pointed out, this Bill was accepted by the House of Commons not only in Committee but upon its second and third readings by majorities which remained unbroken throughout, and are almost, if not altogether, unexampled in the history of a contentious measure such as this.

The Lords and the Licensing Bill.

I recall those facts in order to point out that these were the antecedents, these were the credentials with which, after it had left our House, the Bill presented itself at the portals of the House of Lords. What was the response with which it met? Before a word had been uttered in the House of Lords in explanation of its provisions, its fate was already sealed. As you have reminded us,

Sir, the leader of the Opposition in that Assembly summoned to his own house a private gathering of his own supporters, and there and then, as we are informed, submitted to them on his own authority, to which with one or two protests they immediately deferred, the proposition that the Bill should be at once and summarily put to death. A second reading debate was, indeed, to be allowed, a perfunctory and unreal ceremonial over an already open grave.

Closure by Caucus.

We hear a great deal in another place of the terrors and abuses of the guillotine. There is no topic, as all of you know well, which more readily stimulates the lachrymose glands of the House of Commons crocodile. But the guillotine is at any rate set up by the House itself after public debate, and certainly in all recent cases with a reasonable, I would venture to say an even generous, regard for the requirements of free discussion. But Lord Lansdowne's new form of closure—closure by caucus—surpasses anything that has yet entered into the most despotic dreams of a leader of the Lower House, surpasses them in its indifference alike to the rights of minorities, to the dignity and self-respect of the other House, and to the decencies of public debate. What followed was as empty a farce as has ever been enacted on the Parliamentary stage. There was a debate to lead up to a foregone conclusion, which, for all practical purposes, might just as well have been held at the Oxford Union or the Cogers' Hall. The question, be it remembered, was not whether the provisions of the Bill should be considered and, if need be, amended, but whether in any effective sense they should be considered at all. The debate was illuminated by some speeches of great brilliance and power. I do not think I am misjudging its general tenor and effect when I say that the weight both of argument and of authority was upon one side, when you remember that the further consideration of the Bill was recommended by voice or by vote by men of such divergent views in every other sphere as Lord Rosebery and the Archbishop of Canterbury or Lord Balfour of Burleigh and Lord Milner.

Not an Isolated Incident.

Well, they might just as well have stayed at home. The decision of the caucus had to be registered, and from all quarters of the horizon there was beaten up and there was whipped up a sufficient number of gentlemen with titles, gentlemen of whom, it may be said, with no personal disrespect to them as individuals, that a large proportion of them are totally unknown to their fellow-countrymen, who represent nothing and nobody but themselves, to intrench once more in a position of unassailable security the most powerful and, at the same time, the most pernicious of all the

vested interests of the country. Mr. Ellis, it was a triumph for the trade but it was a spectacle at once grotesque and humiliating to all who know and value the first principles of popular government. If this incident—of which I am not conscious I have given a description that is in any particular over-coloured—if this incident stood alone, it would surely to all who love liberty and believe in democracy be a call to arms. But it does not stand alone. I am not to-night going further back in history than the lifetime of this Parliament and its predecessor. Let me take from their respective annals two parallel illustrations.

The Education and Licensing Bills.

In both Parliaments the Government of the day have attempted to deal in the House of Commons with the two subjects of education and licensing. With respect to the general election of 1900, nothing is more certain or more capable of proof than that neither subject was in issue before the electorate, but that thousands of the electors—tens of thousands, I may say—gave their votes to the Government of the day on the express assurance that they might safely subordinate their opinions on such matters to the great issue of the war. Yet the Tory Government of that day proposed in the Parliament so elected two of the most revolutionary measures of our time—an Education Bill which for the first time quartered denominational schools on the rates, and a Licensing Bill which took away the immemorial discretion of the justices and gave a vested interest to the holder of an annual licence. Sir, those were exactly the kind of measures which an impartial revising Chamber would have refused in the circumstances to pass until they had received at least the permissive approval of the electorate. But the House of Lords made no difficulty with either, and they were permitted to become law without delay, and without demur. Pass now to the next Parliament—that elected in 1906. It is again historically indisputable that at that election education and licensing were burning questions kept steadily before the eyes of the electorate when they were considering how to give their votes. And yet when a Liberal Government proposes, in regard to education in 1906, and in regard to licensing in 1908, measures which in their main principles had the stamp and superscription of a definite electoral mandate, this same revising Chamber in the one case mutilates the Bill out of recognition, and in the other it strangles it on the threshold.

A Matter of Caprice.

It may be said—not here, but outside—that these are rare, or, at any rate, occasional occurrences, and that I have myself admitted that under these same conditions some valuable projects of legisla-

tions have passed into law. That is true, but who decides whether they shall be allowed or disallowed? The whole thing is a matter of caprice—the caprice of an Assembly which in the course of a single Session rejects a Plural Voting Bill and passes a Trade Disputes Bill. You never know where you are, except that there is a strong presumption of sudden and violent death as the fate of any measure which menaces any monopoly. But there is something worse—by which I mean more obnoxious to democratic principles—in the situation than even this element of uncertainty. Who is it that dictates to a number of these docile vehicles into which lobby they shall carry their hereditary votes? Does any one doubt that if at the private meeting to which the chairman and I have referred Lord Lansdowne had told his caucus that they must vote it, the second reading of the Licensing Bill would have been carried?

The Dominating Issue.

To put the thing plainly, the present system enables the leader of the party which has been defeated and repudiated by the electors at the polls to determine through the House of Lords what shall and what shall not be the legislation of the country. The question I want to put to you and to my fellow Liberals outside is this, Is this state of things to continue? We say that it must be brought to an end, and I invite the Liberal party to-night to treat the veto of the House of Lords as the dominating issue in politics—the dominating issue, because in the long run it over-shadows and absorbs every other.

The Question of Dissolution.

Well, gentlemen, if that is my view, I know that I shall be asked to-morrow morning, Why do you not advise His Majesty at once to dissolve Parliament? That would be to admit a new claim on the part of the House of Lords—a claim never yet put forward, never, at any rate, either pressed or admitted—the right to dictate both the occasion and the time of a dissolution. By whom has this alleged right ever been defined, and in what terms? By whom has it ever been recognised, and on what occasions? I venture very confidently to make two assertions in regard to it. The first is that it is historically untenable. The second is that it is from a practical point of view immeasurably absurd. Historically there is not a single case since the Reform Act in 1832 in which a dissolution has been allowed to take place in consequence of a vote of the House of Lords. I may be believed when I say that, unless under the stress of an overwhelming constitutional necessity—I purposely

make that reservation—I do not mean to create such a precedent. But next how, if it was recognised, would it practically operate? Take the case of the Education Bill of 1906. We are fresh from the polls with—if any Government ever had—a clear and an unexhausted mandate. We send our Bill to the Lords. They say: "This won't do; we know better than you what the electors really think and desire; go back to the polls for fresh authority; in the meantime, we mutilate or strangle your Bill." And so on, and so forth. Why, on those terms the whole life of a Liberal Government would be spent Session after Session in a series of general elections. No, that is an unfounded and inadmissible claim. And I say to you—and I am sure that I speak not only in my own name, but in the name of all my colleagues, when I say this—his Majesty's Government will advise the King to dissolve Parliament, not at the time prescribed at its own caprice by an irresponsible Assembly, but at the time, neither earlier nor later, which they, with the confidence of their elected and representative supporters, in their own unfettered discretion deem to be right. This, then, is the great governing issue which lies in front of us. On that, I believe, we all in this room are agreed.

Demands for Legislation.

But I shall be asked, if this is so, what do you propose to do in the next Session of Parliament? Here I will, if I may, take you for a moment into my personal confidence—speaking, not for my colleagues, but myself. In the first place, there is no man in the United Kingdom who on this, as on many other matters, receives more advice. It pours in upon me day and night in a ceaseless—not, perhaps, always a fertilising—stream, from all sorts and conditions of people—men, women, children, and journalists. And, further—I am still speaking, as I say, only for myself, I am not binding any of my colleagues in the Cabinet or outside it, because here again I have peculiar personal advantages which they do not enjoy—one of the main functions of a Prime Minister in these days is to receive deputations. From all quarters and in all causes they come to me, I suppose, on an average for something like two hours on three days in the week. At first, I confess, I rather clung under this discipline; but I am now completely broken in. And if—as I have no reason to fear—if the supply were to fail, I think that about 5 o'clock in the afternoon I should miss my deputation just as some people miss their afternoon tea. But there are deputations and deputations. And the most interesting, and for the purpose we are now considering the most relevant, are those which represent various groups and sections of the House of Commons. One day it is the Welsh who come to me, and who point out to me, with unanswerable force, the claims of Welsh disestablishment. I introduced, myself, a Bill with that

object, and carried it to Committee thirteen years ago, and I am certainly the last man to say it is less urgent to-day than it was then. Then the next day there come the Scotch—my own fellow members—who demand, with an appeal which goes straight home to my convictions and my conscience, another chance for a Small Holdings Bill north of the Tweed. Then it is the turn of the Irish to ask, with abundant, and with super-abundant, reason, for a new Land Purchase Bill. And they are followed hotfoot by the metropolitan members, who represent to me, with arguments which I have neither the capacity nor the wish to refute, that the time is overdue for the unification of the rates of London, and for the setting up of an orderly and rational system of London government. Yes, gentlemen, various as are the demands and diverse the quarters from which they proceed, what I must point out is this—they are all agreed upon one point, and that is that their measure must be mentioned in the King's Speech, and that the best hours, or, at all events, some of the best hours, of the Session must be given to its special consideration. And the worst of it is that I am disposed myself to agree with them all, with each group of them in their turn, because, as they come, one after another, I recognise in them some of our most loyal and stalwart supporters, men who have patiently submitted to the postponement of their own special and cherished ideals, Session after Session, for the exigencies of discipline and the common policy, and to none of whom it is easy to deny the preferential treatment they one and all demand.

"Simplification of Issues and Concentration of Purpose."

Now, if, under these conditions, you ask me what is going to be in the King's Speech next February, I can, of course, at this stage, only give a negative answer. One or two things, I, however, will say to those who urge that we should content ourselves with a neutral and a colourless programme of what are called non-controversial measures, certain to pass the Commons and not likely to offend the susceptibilities of the Lords—to them I venture to say, if there be such, that such advice would be, if it were taken, for the Liberal party a confession of humiliation and impotence. To those, again, who urge that we should thrust to the front, for the sake of enlarging the area of conflict, an almost indefinite number of contentious proposals, I would suggest, in the permanent interests of a progressive policy, our first need at the moment is, without in any way abandoning the great tasks upon which our hopes are set—I will mention, for instance, unemployment—simplification of issues and concentration of purpose. I say that the more readily because there is one subject which clearly and inevitably must absorb a large part of the time of the coming Session, and that is

The Government's Finance.

Trade has been bad, though I hope and believe that there are on the horizon signs of improvement. Bad trade and restricted employment mean curtailed consumption, and an inelastic and, under some heads, a dwindling revenue. On the other hand, the needs that have to be met, quite apart from automatic increases and other new items, have been necessarily and largely swollen by the provision which Parliament has this year sanctioned for old age pensions. We have been accused in this matter of reckless and improvident finance—a charge which comes with little grace from the mouths of those who, in the course of ten years, added to the normal expenditure of the country more than £20,000,000. I believe no charge more unfounded has ever been preferred. I was Chancellor of the Exchequer for the best part of three years, and during the whole of that time we were careful not to make a move in this matter until we had prepared the ground. What did we do? We remitted during those years nearly £7,750,000 of taxation. Up to March 31st next we shall have reduced the aggregate capital liabilities of the nation by £41,000,000, with an annual saving of interest of nearly £1,250,000. I do not hesitate to say to you, gentlemen, that but for these precautionary measures, which it took the best part of three years to carry through, it probably would have been impossible to face such a new liability as that involved in old age pensions.

Next Year's Budget.

The task which lies before the Chancellor of the Exchequer is in any case one of the most severe that has ever fallen to an incumbent of his office. He may, at any rate, take satisfaction in the thought that he has not to provide like the two great Protectionist countries of the world for an estimated deficit, in the one case of 2½ millions and in the other of 28 millions. It is not for me to suggest or even to guess to-night at the sources from which he will seek to satisfy his requirements, but that he will prove equal to the burden laid upon him I entertain no doubt. But one thing is certain, that the Budget of next year will stand at the very centre of our work, by which, I was going to say, we shall stand or fall, by which certainly we shall be judged in the estimation both of the present and of posterity.

And one thing more I will venture to say without going into details—it will and must raise again in the acutest form a controversy from which we do not shrink, which we welcome, whether the admitted and growing needs of a policy of social reform are to be provided by the finance of Free Trade or by turning our backs on the experience of 60 years and recurring to the alluring and impoverishing fallacies of Protection. Finance is an instrument of great potency and also of great flexibility, and it may be found to

be, in some directions at any rate, a partial solvent of what under our existing constitutional conditions would otherwise be insoluble problems.

The Supporters of the Licensing Bill.

Well, gentlemen, I have detained you longer than I had intended. But I must come back to the beginning and what really ought to have been, I suppose, the topic of my speech—namely, the Licensing Bill. I cannot tell you—I speak in all frankness, and, I am sure you will all believe, with the most genuine feeling, as a friend to friends—how strongly I entertain the sense of profound and unforgettable obligation to my supporters in the House of Commons for the loyal, disciplined, persistent, and unshakable help which they rendered to us all through the conduct of that most arduous undertaking. I have already had the pleasure of acknowledging the debt which I and others owe to colleagues in the Cabinet and out of it who assisted me in the conduct of the Bill. Let me supplement those acknowledgments by one to the leaders, the well-worn, veteran leaders of the temperance party—my friend Sir Thomas Whittaker, my friend Mr. Leif Jones, my friend Mr. Charles Roberts—who illuminated our debates with brilliant and trenchant speeches and who showed over and over again throughout the controversy how unfounded, how absolutely shadowless and baseless was the charge that the men who are bent on temperance reform are unpractical faddists not capable of adapting themselves to the conditions of British legislation. That charge can never be made again after this year. This was the greatest and best opportunity that has ever occurred in our time for the solution upon wise, rational, and equitable lines of the most pressing of the social problems of the day.

"Change—Radical, Permanent, and Fundamental."

Why has it not been solved? I bring you back to the point from which I started. It has not been solved, not because in the House of Commons, among the chosen representatives of the people, among all parties interested on the Liberal side, there was not a substantial consensus of opinion as to what ought to be done, but its solution has been, I will not say frustrated, but may be indefinitely postponed by the action of an irresponsible body which has no claim to reflect the opinions of the nation. I know of no case which could more clearly illustrate and more imperiously demand change, radical, permanent, and fundamental, in our existing con-

stitutional conditions than the action of the House of Lords in regard to the Licensing Bill. In conclusion, I thank every one of you for the confidence—I might almost use a stronger word than confidence—which you have shown towards me from the moment when I succeeded to the place of our beloved and lamented leader, who was with us a year ago. I entered upon that task with many misgivings. I doubted, and honestly doubted, my capacity to perform it, but among all my shortcomings I have always been sustained, from that moment to this, and I am certain I shall be sustained to the end, by the feeling that there is amongst us in the Liberal party—not only are there no personal rivalries, not only are there no sectional differences—but there is a strong pervading irresistible unity of purpose and of ideal which will enable us to pursue great causes in a spirit worthy of their attainment.

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